

African Americans in Seneca County in 1810

Seneca County in 1810 stretched from Lake Ontario to south of Ithaca, including the towns of Ulysses and Hector. The 1810 federal census showed a county-wide population of 16,609. A total of 125 of these were African Americans (the term “black” was commonly used then). There were three different categories of “blacks” at that time: slaves, free blacks living with a white family, and free blacks living alone.¹

Robert S. Rose, who owned the large farm later to be known as Rose Hill, had the largest number of slaves. In 1803, Rose had brought his entire family and his 37 slaves from his Virginia plantation to the town of Fayette with the intention of establishing a profitable plantation-type agricultural operation. It appears that the attempt to transplant plantation type agriculture from Virginia to the Finger Lakes was not a financial success. Robert Rose manumitted many of his enslaved people, beginning in 1809. In 1820, however, he still held nine people in slavery—six men and three women—more than any other single person in Seneca County. He did not always treat even good workers with dignity. An 1893 county history contained an account of Rose striking a man named Peter with a cane. An 1828 newspaper story noted that he shot and wounded “one of his slaves, of the name of Henry” (probably Henry Douglass, Sr.) for refusing to work in the brickyard on Sunday.²

Ephraim and John Maynard of Junius (in 1810 Junius was all of Seneca County north of the Seneca River to Lake Ontario) had eight slaves between them and Thomas Helm of the Wolcott area had seven. Other slave-owners in Junius were Wilhelmus Mynderse (1 slave), Robert Oliver (2), Daniel Sayre (2), and Peter Miller (1). The Widow Van Cleef in Fayette had two slaves. Slave owners in Ovid were Eleanor Seeley (widow of John) (1), Abraham Van Doren, Levey Ellis, Thomas Stuart, Cornelius Bodine, William Ditmars, Henry Van Liew, Oliver Miller, William P. Gold, John Tunison and John Goltry. In Hector, Bazaleel Seeley owned two slaves.

People in the town of Romulus with slaves or free blacks living with them were Benjamin Dey, Benjamin Boardman, William Boots, John Sayre, Hannah McKnight, John Schuyler, Stephen Miller, William Waldron, Solomon Culver, Lewis Miller and Israel Brown. William W. Folwell of Romulus and William Norris of Ovid each had one free black living in their household.

Other free blacks who were not dependent upon white benefactors were John Dunkerson in Fayette; in Romulus there were Samuel West who had a family of six, Simon Wells with a family of five, and Eli Dolphin with a family of four. In Hector there were the ten members of the Tom Wickoff family.

Approximately 1810, but after the taking of the 1810 census data, Quam Demund, a free black, settled as a farmer in the town of Covert. He served in the War of 1812. Quam and Lydia, his first wife, had six children. Quam and Phebe, his second wife, has ten children. He died in 1877, leaving a very detailed will and a considerable amount of wealth for that time to his second wife Phebe. Interestingly the executors’ administration papers contain a comment that “all the children named in the will are living—no child has died being a child.”

All of this information should help the reader to understand that Seneca County has had an extensive African American population, including slaves and free blacks, in its early history.

¹ Betty Auten, “Blacks in Seneca County-1810,” Seneca County History newsletter Vol. 1, No. 1, September 1984, p. 3

² *Judith Wellman, Discovering the Underground Railroad, Abolitionism and African American Life in Seneca County, New York, 1820-1880, pp 91-98.*